



Charles B. Seib *Part 9/27/75*

Assassination Attempt Publicity

Among proposals for stemming what could be a wave of attempts to assassinate the President was a proposal by Vice President Rockefeller. It deserves more attention than it got—which was practically none—not because it was good but because it was bad.

Rockefeller urged that the media stop talking about the assassination attempts. "Let's stop putting it on the front pages and on television," he said according to a UPI dispatch. "Psychiatrists say every time there is any publicity, it is stimulating to the unstable."

The suggestion was well-meant but wrong-headed. There is no danger that it will be followed, but it should be examined because it represents a certain kind of thinking about the press and its role in our society.

It is a kind of thinking that surfaces at every time of national trauma. It was common during the height of the Watergate disclosures. In its extreme form, it seems to say that if the messenger is silenced, the bad news will not exist. Then no one will have bad thoughts and we can go our happy ways.

The assassination attempts and the threat of others is a deadly serious problem. But it is up to the President and his protectors to take the necessary steps to deal with it. A national conspiracy of silence is not the answer.

The job of the press—print and electronic—is to report the news. When an attempt is made to kill the President, that is legitimate news of transcendent importance. To cover it fully and prominently is not overplaying a cheap story to fill the needs of a dull day or taking facts out of

context to titillate the customers. It is, rather, meeting a responsibility.

The nation has come close to losing its chief executive to an assassin. Moreover, there is mounting evidence of a sick strain in our society. All this is disturbing, even frightening, but it can best be faced and dealt with by a fully informed public.

Questions can and should be raised about the media's handling of the assassination stories and, in fact, about the handling of news generally.

One can ask whether big, black banner headlines are a sensible way to convey important information to

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the public in this troubled day and age. And one can question the sheer volume of feature and follow-up articles which explore every tiny facet of big events like those of Sacramento and San Francisco. The press does have a weakness for overkill.

Television coverage, too, raises questions. The instant replay is great in sports, but is it wise to carry it to extremes when reporting a traumatizing event?

Even the most gripping newspaper story normally is read only once. But how many times did television viewers see the film from San Francisco—the President emerging from the hotel with a wave to the crowd, then crouching in response to the sound of the shot; the cars streaking off to the airport; the police charging in on Sara Jane Moore and carrying her into the hotel?

At normal speed and in slow motion, with the actual sounds and with

commentary, again and again the film was rerun and the story retold. Two days after the event it was still going on.

If it is true that saturation coverage can trigger sick minds, then certainly this almost obsessive repetition should be examined.

But questioning the techniques and practices of the news business is a far cry from doing what Rockefeller suggested—getting the story off the front pages and TV screens.

The press has been doing its job in telling the public about the events in California and their aftermath. It has been doing it with its usual flamboyance and with occasional excesses, to be sure, but the coverage generally has been appropriate to the occasion.

There is much more of this story to be told.

The Secret Service is under fire, and investigations are about to start. The President is being urged to curtail his handshaking forays and, like a good politician, he is resisting. Gun control proposals are again receiving attention from the lawmakers. Tantalizing bits of the strange story of Sara Jane Moore, radical and informer, are coming out. The public certainly has the right to be fully informed about these matters.

Nearly 200 years ago the decision was made that this country should have a press free to tell the people, in its own way, what was going on. This freedom, and its occasional abuse, may sometimes complicate things for the authorities. It may even be responsible for putting thoughts into sick minds. But those are not reasons for denying the public easy access to the information necessary to the operation of a free society.